

Decision Memo
Agricultural Irrigation and Livestock Watering System
Easements for 12 Facilities
Under the Colorado Ditch Bill Act of 1986

Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests
Region 2, USDA Forest Service

I. Background

The Act of October 27, 1986 (100 stat. 3047; known as the "Colorado Ditch Bill"), amended Title V of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) (43 U.S.C. 1761), authorizing the Secretary of Agriculture to issue permanent easements for qualifying water conveyance systems occupying National Forest System lands used for agricultural irrigation or livestock watering purposes.

FSM 2729.16f. States "Granting easements under FLPMA for existing water conveyance system facilities, with historic operational activities, is not discretionary and, therefore, does not constitute a Federal action subject to analysis or review. Conditions of the grant, including operations and maintenance activities (FSM 2729.16k), may require environmental analysis and review (FSM 1952.2) pursuant to an appropriate level of environmental analysis consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The authorized officer may condition easements beyond the standard terms and conditions in Form FS-2700-9a as necessary to insure consistency with applicable laws and regulations and to adequately protect forest resources. This decision defines the conditions for each easement which will be issued as a result of this document. The terms and conditions described in the Operations and Maintenance (O&M) Plan for each facility were developed based on an interdisciplinary review, from which recommendations were made to provide for adequate resource protection.

II. Decision

A. Description of Decision

I have determined that all applicants and facilities listed in the attached Appendix A, all on the Medicine Bow and Routt National Forests, qualify for a Ditch Bill Easement and I have decided to condition these ditch bill easements by issuing an O&M Plan developed for, and specific to, each easement. I have determined that implementation of the O&M Plans will not result in any significant change in use or management of the facilities, so any deviation from effects experienced in the past will be minimal.

B. Rationale for My Decision

These applicants have applied for easements under Public Law 99-545, commonly referred to as "The Colorado Ditch Bill." Under this act, an easement must be granted if the applicant meets specific requirements and if the water system meets all criteria of the Act. It has been determined that the applicants and facilities in the attached list meet all the requirements of the act, therefore an easement must be granted.

The terms and conditions described in the Operation and Maintenance (O&M) plan for each facility were developed based on an interdisciplinary review, from which recommendations were made to provide for adequate resource protection.

While granting of such easements is non-discretionary and, therefore, not a Federal action subject to analysis or review (FSM 2729.16f), analysis was conducted for this use to determine if there was a need for additional conditioning of the easement for operation and maintenance activities, and for the protection of Threatened, Endangered, or Sensitive (TES) Species. The purpose of this decision is to document any environmental concerns associated with the operation and maintenance of the ditches and reservoirs, and their potential effect on TES Species, and to document the need for any additional conditioning of the easement necessary to protect the environment from degradation due to continued operation of the water conveyance and storage systems.

III. Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Decision

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement or Environmental Assessment when they are within one of the categories identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 7 CFR part 1b.3 or one of the categories identified by the Chief of the Forest Service in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 sections 31.1b or 31.2, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative environmental effect. Supporting documents for this project will be retained in a project file at the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests Supervisor's Office in Laramie, Wyoming.

A. Category of Exclusion

My decision, to apply terms and conditions to these easements via the O&M plans, is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement pursuant to Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, 31.2. This project fits Category 15: "Issuance of a new special use authorization for a new term to replace an existing or expired special use authorization when the only changes are administrative, there are no changes to the authorized facilities or increases

in the scope or intensity of authorized activities, and the applicant or holder is in full compliance with the terms and conditions of the special use authorization.” These facilities were previously authorized under a special use permit, which will now be replaced by the easement. Use will generally remain the same.

B. Relationship to Extraordinary Circumstances

There are no conditions that would constitute a significant effect on an extraordinary circumstance related to the proposed authorization. This conclusion is based on evaluation of the following items:

1. Federally listed Threatened, Endangered, Proposed (TEP) and Forest Service Sensitive Species or their Critical Habitat (Endangered Species Act: Section 7.)

A Biological Assessment (BA for Ditch Bill Easements) was prepared and approved on May 12, 2006, addressing the potential effects of conditions under which continued Operation and Maintenance (O&M) of an existing facility will be authorized would have on TEP species. The BA addressed the effects of 6,474 acre-feet (af) of water depletion from 11 facilities in the Upper Colorado and Yampa River Basins on four endangered fish occurring in the Colorado River drainage: Colorado pikeminnow (*Ptychocheilus lucius*), humpback chub (*Gila cypha*), bonytail chub (*Gila elegans*), and razorback sucker (*Xyrauchen texanus*) and their critical habitats. The BA also examined potential effects of implementing Ditch Bill O&M plans on Canada lynx (*Lynx Canadensis*), and bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). Determinations by species are:

- **Four endangered fish in the Colorado River drainage – “likely to adversely affect” the Colorado Pikeminnow, Razorback Sucker, Humpback Chub, Bonytail Chub, and is also “likely to adversely affect” the designated critical habitat located downstream of the action, due to water depletions.**
- **Canada lynx – “may affect” but is “not likely to adversely affect” due to implementation of Operation and Maintenance Plans.**
- **Bald eagle– “No effect”.**

On May 12, 2006 , the Forest Received a Biological Opinion (BO - ES/GJ-6-CO-04-F-012-YP011-MS 65412 GJ) from Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) stating that the proposed action would jeopardize the continued existence of the four endangered fish and result in adverse modification of critical habitat.. However the FWS determined that the jeopardy determination can be offset by implementation of a Section 7 Agreement and the Recovery Implementation Program Recovery Action Plan (RIPRAP) developed in 1993 for the endangered fish. The FWS determined that sufficient progress to recover these four endangered fish is being made, and therefore continued implementation of the Recovery Program will minimize effects of depleting 6,477 af of water, and thus serves

as reasonable and prudent measures for minimizing take of listed fish resulting from these depletions.

The FWS also concurred on the finding of "may effect" but is "not likely to adversely affect" to Canada Lynx.

Sensitive Species (FSM 2670): Biological Evaluations (BE) in accordance with FSH 2670 were prepared, (BE of Plant/Animal Spp. and MIS Report for Ditch Bill Easement Applications, dated March, 2006) addressing the effects of the proposed action on Forest Service sensitive plant and animal species. The report concluded that the proposed actions **"may impact some individuals, but is not likely to cause a trend towards Federal listing or result in loss of viability in the planning area"**. No additional conditioning of the easements beyond the standard O&M plans is required for protection of sensitive plant and animal species.

2. Floodplains and Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds - Floodplains and Wetlands effects are inherent in water diversion facilities associated with streams and reservoirs. The water conveyance and storage infrastructure occupies a relatively small percentage of floodplains and should have no effect on flood stage. Several common types of wetlands are indirectly affected by dewatering, but this impact is associated with a valid State water right and is non-discretionary.

Nearly all watersheds on the Forest provide for public water supplies. None of the facilities are located in a designated municipal watershed. This use is an established baseline and consequently will not result in a change in effect to public water supply.

3. Congressionally Designated Areas - None of the facilities associated with this Decision are located within Congressionally Designated areas.

4. Inventoried Roadless Areas - The following facilities, further described in Appendix A to this decision, are located wholly or partially within Inventoried Roadless Areas as defined in the Medicine Bow NF Forest Plan Revision. Fletcher and Battle ditches are located in the Little Snake and Battle Creek Inventoried Roadless Areas respectively. The existence of these facilities and the operation and maintenance of the same pre-date roadless inventories. Guidelines to limit additional impacts on the roadless character of the surrounding area are established in the Operation and Maintenance Plan that accompanies the easement.

5. Research Natural Areas - None of the facilities associated with this Decision are located within Research Natural areas.

6. Native American Religious or Cultural Sites, or Areas - The facilities listed in Appendix A were reviewed by the Forest Archaeologist. There are no known American Indian religious or cultural sites in the project areas. There will be no effects to this circumstance.

7. *Archaeological Sites or Historic Properties or Areas* - The Forest Archeologist spoke with representatives from the Colorado and Wyoming State Historic Preservation Office. Both offices said that they did not need to see consultation from the Med Bow/Routt concerning the Ditch Bill. Rather, they would prefer to see the Forest Service consult when there is an action that may affect any potentially National Register eligible ditch at the time of the action.

The Forest has made a determination that no significant historic properties will be affected. All Operation and Maintenance Plans include a clause requiring operations to cease until a review can be completed and appropriate action taken, if items of archaeological, paleontological or historic value are discovered.

IV. OTHER RESOURCES CONSIDERED

All facilities were surveyed using hand held GPS units. Numerous point location issues of concern such as diversion structures, measuring devices, ditch freeboard, flow impediments, erosion, noxious weeds, fish barriers and other, were logged and photographed to document resource maintenance needs to aid in developing the Operation and Maintenance Plan for each.

V. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Scoping for public concern and comment for these listed facilities was accomplished by:

1. Listing the proposal to issue conditional permanent easements in the MBR "Schedule of Proposed Actions" on March 1, 2005;
2. Issuing letters on June 8, 2005, from the Yampa Ranger District, to all individuals and organizations that have expressed interest or have been identified as having an interest in being informed of activities to take place on the MBR NF and requesting their comment on any extraordinary circumstances by July 1, 2005. These June 8th letters identified all facilities on the Forest that were being considered for Ditch Bill easements and listed the extraordinary circumstances which would be of concern to the Forest Service.

The Yampa Ranger District received a single letter of comment, jointly signed by Trout Unlimited and High Country Citizen's Alliance. This letter was similar in content and primarily addressed Forest Service policy with respect to administering the easements. There were no general public comments received specific to the facilities included in this decision.

VI. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND FOREST SERVICE POLICY

My decision will comply with all applicable laws and regulations. Supporting documentation for these findings is located in the project files. A summary of pertinent laws follow.

Federal Land Policy Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) as amended by Public Law 99-545, of October 27, 1986 (Colorado Ditch Bill): The Act directed the Secretary of Agriculture to issue permanent easements to owners of certain qualifying water storage and/or transmission facilities on National Forest System Lands, which were used to convey water to private lands for agricultural irrigation and livestock watering purposes. All applications and supporting documentation for the listed facilities meet the criteria specified by the act.

National Forest Management Act: The projects are consistent with the 1998 Routt National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and the 2002 Medicine Bow National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan Revision. Management Indicator Species (MIS) identified in both Plans were considered in the Biological Evaluations for the affected areas, prepared in March, 2006, and effects of the action were analyzed. The proposed activity is determined to have minimal impact or have no measurable impact on MIS.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA): Conditioning these easements via the O&M Plans, is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement pursuant to Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, 31.2, 15. Environmental review is documented by this Decision Memo and supporting information contained in the project files.

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA): In addition to the discussion under items 6 and 7 of 'extraordinary circumstances', the Operation and Maintenance Plan which accompanies each easement includes a clause (#6) which requires that "If any items of archaeological, paleontological, or historic value, including but not limited to historic or prehistoric artifacts, structures, monuments, human remains and funerary objects are discovered, the Holder shall immediately cease all activities". Continued activity must be approved by an authorized officer.

Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898) - This Order requires consideration of whether projects would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. This decision complies with the Act as it is not expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

Effects of Action on Social Groups - There will be no effects on minorities, Native Americans, women or the civil liberties of any other American citizen.

Effects on Prime Rangeland, Forest Land and Farm Land - The decision is in compliance with Federal Regulations for prime range, forest and farm lands. There will be no effect on NFS grazing allotments. The facilities being authorized convey water to private lands for beneficial use in agricultural irrigation and livestock watering.

Energy Requirements and Conservation Potential - The action will not result in a change in energy requirements or conservation potential.

Air Quality - The project will have no long term effect on air quality. Some minor intermittent and localized effect may result from maintenance activities.

Wild and Scenic Rivers Act - There are no designated Wild or Scenic Rivers impacted by the operation of these facilities.

V. ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL


This decision is not subject to administrative appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12(f).

VI. IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision may be implemented immediately.

VII. CONTACT PERSON

Further information about this decision can be obtained from Thomas A. Florich, Ditch Bill Project Team Leader, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests, 2468 Jackson Street, Laramie, WY 82070; Phone (307) 745-2435; FAX (307) 745-2398; or electronically at tflorich@fs.fed.us

For Acting

~~RICHARD STEM~~ *NORA RASURE*
Deputy Regional Forester
Rocky Mountain Region, R-2
USDA Forest Service

Date

February 25, 2008

Appendix A. Ditch Bill Facilities by river basin and depletion amount.				
Applicant	Facility/Year Constructed	River Basin	Direct Flow Water Right (cfs or ac-ft)	Depletion Amount (ac-ft/yr)¹
Salisbury Livestock Co.	Battle Creek Ditch/ 11-23-1901	Little Snake	1.14 cfs	84
James Hill, III ²	Fletcher Ditch/ 10-26-1912	Little Snake	1.64 cfs	121
Other owners already issued ditch bill easements	Fletcher Ditch/ 10-26-1912	Little Snake	8.57 cfs	631
James C. O'Neill/ Cynthia Kelley O'Neill ²	Ranger Ditch	Little Snake	5.58 cfs	411
Kayser Mutual Ditch Co. ²	Kayser Mutual Ditch/ 11-22-1902	Upper Colorado	25.0 cfs	1,842
Lynn Matheson & Swanson Bros. Ranch ²	Matheson Reservoir/1952 (60 acres)	Upper Colorado	1,074 ac-ft	731
Kurtz Family, LLC ²	Big Mesa Ditch/ 5-10-1948	Yampa	8.5 cfs	626
Sleeping Lion Ranch ²	Dome Creek Ditch/ 7-9-1901	Yampa	5.0 cfs	368
Roulette Trust	Etzler Ditch/ 6-1-1905	Yampa	0.5 cfs	37
Elaine Gay ²	Gabioud Ditch/ 6-1-1892	Yampa	5.38 cfs	396
Kevin Krausgrill ²	F.D. Hutchinson Ditch/ 7-15-1890	Yampa	4.0 cfs	295
Valora, Castor & Yoast Patterson ²	Last Chance Ditch/ 6-1-1902	Yampa	3.0 cfs	221
Reifsneider, Hogsett, Ritter & Greenhalgh	Last Chance Ditch/ 6-1-1902	Yampa	0.5 cfs	37
Twenty Mile Coal Company ²	Last Chance Ditch/ 6-1-1902	Yampa	2.5 cfs	184
K.L. Johnny Manchac/Matt Anderson ²	Last Chance Ditch/ 6-1-1902	Yampa	2.5 cfs	184
Other owners already issued ditch bill easements	Last Chance Ditch/ 6-1-1902	Yampa	4.04 cfs	298
Winslett Ranch	Konopik Reservoir ³ (2.6 acres)	Yampa	13.3 ac-ft	11
GRAND TOTAL Water Depletions:				6,477
Upper Colorado River Basin Water Depletions:				2,573
Yampa River Basin, Including Little Snake River, Water Depletions:				3,904